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THE RIGHT HON. HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH

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ASQUITH: THE MASTER STATESMAN

BY THE EDITOR

HAS England found herself?

Two short years ago this would have been the idlest of questions. The whole nation was in turmoil. Class was arrayed against class in a spirit of bitterness approaching hate. Demagogism was rampant against privilege, and privilege, in turn, aroused at last from confident assurance of actual possession, was become violent. The burdens of taxation were being shifted to backs able to bear them. New definitions were being found for "vested rights." Titles to great tracts of land were openly questioned. Monarchs of bygone days had granted them, to be sure; but had the earth, the source of very existence, ever been the monarchs' to give? Granting the validity accorded by usage to prolonged occupancy and conceding the futility of creating anarchy in ownerships, did not a moral right still inhere in the people to take to themselves by indirection the advantages of which they had been deprived by the favor of man, contrary to the law of nature?

These were the questions being pushed home to millions of minds from which sustenance had been withheld so long as to render them incapable of reasoning and to leave only growing comprehension of the power of numbers. The temporizing policy of successive ministries of pampering, in-

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stead of educating, the masses was finding its inevitable consequence. The proletariat was waxing insolent; labor, making exorbitant demands, was become a bully; and the commonwealth which had grown to be the most powerful in the world by overthrowing tyranny after tyranny, stood menaced by the worst of despotisms—that of a half-educated, untrained, intolerant populace.

The peril not only to the British Empire, but to theoretically free and well-ordered institutions, even to Saxon civilization, was both real and imminent. But realization came slowly to those who considered themselves most deeply concerned and most unjustly wronged by the sudden, world-wide on-sweep of democracy. For more than a century the “governing class” had not ceased for an instant to rule. Nominal authority had passed with suspicious regularity and ready acquiescence back and forth from one political party to another. Genius embodied in a Bright or a Gladstone had extorted an occasional though reluctant and hardly more than negligible, concession. But the finality of decision still lay and was expected to remain forever in a House of Lords, which long since had forfeited the respect rightfully due a cultured, trained, and patriotic aristocracy by taking to itself a swarm of titled tradesmen, who were only too glad to show disdain of their true class by truckling to their betters.

That a governmental anachronism such as this should exist for long, especially as a body of sheer obdurate resistance, in a community justly renowned for its intelligence, self-direction, and resolution, was an incredible supposition. And yet, so strong is tradition and so powerful the privilege hallowed by age from generation to generation, few of the class born, as they believed, to govern could, and of those none would, recognize the inevitableness of expansion of authority in the development of a race instinctively hostile to stagnation.

So it happened, but two short years ago, that Britain approached more closely to civil war than the vast majority of her own people suspected or than the smallest number of our countrymen ever dreamed. The many heralded “crises” in England had become subjects of passing jocularity in America, but those of us who were on the spot and cognizant of the true condition of affairs at the crucial moment had no illusions. The unduly exploited specter of Germany making wanton assault was but a fantastic imagining when contrasted with the real peril of the railway strike of 1910. It

was then, when the opposing forces stood looking indomitably into each other's eyes, awaiting only the lighting of a match to start the conflagration, that England required and—in Herbert Henry Asquith—found a master.

The Press of England, unlike that of America, has not yet broken the shackles of partisanship. A large majority of the public journals, moreover, are Conservative, and those that are not are generally more Radical than the present Prime Minister. It still remains, therefore, for discriminating History to accord due honor to the man whom the direful occasion found ready to perform his part with a courage that ignored consequences to party or to self. Suffice it for the present purpose to recall that the swift and sure effectiveness with which he countered the beginning of a labor revolution shrewdly designed to paralyze the country and starve its inhabitants has hardly been equaled in sheer force and adequacy. He flung "politics" to the winds; he never stopped to think how his action might influence voters; he turned his eyes squarely to the immediate need and, by a stroke of matured decisiveness, by declaring promptly and firmly that, if necessary, he would employ all the resources of the Government to keep the railways in running order, he averted the most appalling distress that could befall a densely populated land. All Englishmen of all parties and classes, strikers and non-strikers, employers and employed, rich and poor, but the poor especially, incurred a heavy debt of gratitude to their Prime Minister on that occasion for the grim determination which he manifested in facing and quelling a storm that would have daunted and might easily have overwhelmed one not made of the stoutest fiber.

And a great many Englishmen still owe him something more than gratitude. They owe him an apology for their egregious and generally wilful misreading of his character at a time when consideration of the common good should have induced strengthening of his hands. For Mr. Asquith had proven his mettle on more than one occasion. In the old days of his Home-Secretaryship when, the idol of Labor, he was stretching all the powers of his office in the cause of social and industrial reform and impressing upon the nation a new sense of its responsibilities, he, nevertheless, on three crucial questions—the release of the Irish dynamiters, the right of the unemployed to meet in Trafalgar Square, and the use of the military in quelling industrial riots—had

not hesitated to stand up to Labor in the country and to his colleagues in the House of Commons when convinced that the public interest so required. His action in those exigencies should have disposed forever of the legend of Mr. Asquith's reputed flabbiness of temperament—a myth which, though circulated with design to hurt as late as two years ago, has now disappeared before an exhibition of resourcefulness and resolution hardly equaled, certainly unsurpassed, in constructive statesmanship of recent times.

Few appreciated the true significance, and practically none the surging possibilities, of the return of the Liberals to power in 1906. Like the Democrats of our own country in their recent day of triumph, they had been outside the breastworks for virtually twenty years. Like the Democrats, too, they lacked cohesiveness as a party organization, were inclined to factiousness, and seemed more likely than not to demonstrate sheer incapacity for efficient and successful government. Short shrift was allotted them by observers of acknowledged competence.

But the fates had taken charge of the melting-pot, and, to the surprise of all, Campbell-Bannerman, who was reckoned the white elephant of his party, quickly developed as the instrument of its salvation. The need of the moment was pacification rather than aggressive leadership, and, as a lubricant of the highest efficacy, the cheery, persuasive, and sympathetic Scotsman was quite the peer of our own McKinley.

“What,” asked Mr. Asquith in his simple and touching tribute to his predecessor in the House of Commons, “what was the secret of the hold which in these later days Campbell-Bannerman unquestionably had on the admiration and affection of men of all parties and all creeds? If, as I think was the case, he was one of those men who require to be fully known to be justly measured, may I not say that the more we knew him, both followers and opponents, the more we became aware that on the moral as on the intellectual side he had endowments, rare in themselves, still rarer in their combination? For example, he was singularly sensitive to human suffering and wrong-doing, delicate and even tender in his sympathies, always disposed to despise victories won in any sphere by mere brute force, an almost passionate lover of peace. And yet we have not seen in our time a man of greater courage—courage not of the defiant

or aggressive type, but calm, patient, persistent, indomitable. Let me, Sir, recall another apparent contrast in his nature. In politics I think he may be fairly described as an idealist in aim, and an optimist by temperament. Great causes appealed to him. He was not ashamed, even on the verge of old age, to see visions and to dream dreams. He had no misgivings as to the future of democracy. He had a single-minded and unquenchable faith in the unceasing progress and the growing unity of mankind."

Mr. Asquith was speaking of Campbell-Bannerman, but unconsciously, as those who know him best will testify, he delineated his own most admirable, though little recognized, traits and voiced his own high aspirations. But what he said of Campbell-Bannerman was true, and credit must not be withheld from one who performed so well his mission to pave the way for one greater and stronger than himself.

We have cited 1910 by way of effective contrast with the present time because that was the year which marked a turning-point in English history by riveting a personal authority which, in consequence of subsequent events, has now become pre-eminent. The first two years of the present administration were the more troublous and turbulent naturally because it was during that period that Mr. Asquith was feeling his cautious way in an endeavor to effect actual and positively essential reforms without rending the fabric of government and—well, to achieve ideals it is necessary to shatter idols. Those were bad days for England, but if Britain were to continue Britain they had to be.

Behold the results! Think, for a moment, of what the Liberals have accomplished in these few years! They have fought through two General Elections; they have broken forever the obstructive power of the House of Lords; they have passed the most revolutionary Budgets and profoundly modified the framework of the British Constitution; they have weathered at least three international crises when war seemed to be a probability of the next twenty-four hours; they have passed vast measures of social reform like the Insurance Act, the Old Age Pensions Act, and the Act establishing a national system of Labor Exchanges; they have struggled through two terrible explosions of industrial unrest that for a time threatened the paralysis of all British trade; they have been confronted with, and have resolutely tackled, the new and urgent problems of national defense and

Imperial consolidation; and they are now disestablishing the Welsh Church and granting Home Rule to Ireland.

In all these achievements Mr. Asquith has played the foremost part; the main burden of deciding, of leading, of defending has fallen on him; and he has done his work with a masterful thoroughness that stamps his administration as the most efficient within the recollection of living man.

True, the promise of definite transformation of the famous Second Chamber into an elective and truly representative body yet awaits fulfilment, but there is no more doubt of the Prime Minister's ability, than of his purpose, to effect it. Already his conception has taken form in his mind and his programme is outlined. Accomplishment awaits only the well-gauged time for action.

To the question, then—Has England found herself?—the answer undoubtedly is yes. Two years ago the Tory opposition to broadened government was more than obdurate; it was furious. "No surrender" was the battle-cry. Hot-headed scions of great families in the House of Commons hooted at the people's ministers and howled down their Premier, to the music of applause from their ladyfolk. "Save the Constitution!" "Treason!" "Treason!" thundered Garvin week in and week out, to the delight of earls and countesses and self-expatriated Americans. Social ostracism was visited unsparingly, though amusingly, upon the Prime Minister and the most brilliant woman in England; no execration was too savage for the Chancellor of the Exchequer; Churchill was a renegade; Harcourt a time-server; Rufus Isaacs a marplot of a Jew; Redmond the most detestable of Fenians; Sir Edward Grey alone was deemed worthy of respect and consideration.

Now all, or nearly all, is changed. Public business is transacted without disturbance; Parliament meets, patiently performs the tasks allotted by its master, and quietly adjourns for the discomfiture of grouse and partridges; the voice of Garvin is become the merest echo; the entire opposition has awakened finally to realization of its impotence and, *mirabile dictu*, is beginning to be reconciled to the inevitable—to the saving, not the wrecking, of a National Constitution.

But one ray of hope has appeared upon the narrow Tory horizon in the past year—the speculation by Mr. Lloyd-George and Sir Rufus Isaacs in American Marconi shares.

At last there was something tangible to grasp—a veritable scandal, which in truth would have spelled the downfall of a ministry not so many years ago. But standards of official virtue are not as high in England to-day as once they were, and, in the end, the masses, as ever, found little difficulty in palliating mere offenses against niceties of judgment and taste. After all, Lloyd-George had not profited from his imprudent ventures, and, even though he had, was he not still their eager champion? What could advantage from substituting Mr. Bonar Law in the place of authority? What could he offer in lieu of the Welshman's innumerable humanitarian projects? Had not the fogies of his own party forbidden him to enunciate even the broadest kind of a policy, to say nothing of a single specific proposal? So the tongues wagged on the corners, and the Conservative journals, true to the British tradition of national self-extermination, invariably began a criticism with an apology.

Nevertheless, the predicament forced upon the Prime Minister was worse than awkward; it was surcharged with menace to all his plans; nothing less than his own immaculateness and perfect poise could have borne him through. But time helped and patience won.

There is nothing so paradoxical as politics. At the risk of seeming presumptuous, we hazard the opinion—a view sustained incidentally by the latest bye-election—that the net political result of the Marconi revelations is an actual strengthening of the Liberal party. Not only has the figure of the real leader been brought into bold and advantageous relief, but at least one dangerously possible rival has found his true place as a most effective advocate unfitted by temperament for the assumption of highest responsibility. No doubt now remains that, if occasion should arise to find a successor for Mr. Asquith, the royal summons would go, not to Mr. Lloyd-George, but to Sir Edward Grey—a circumstance of the utmost value to a party still in the minority in England and sure to be dependent, when the present allies shall have drifted away, upon confidence rather than upon enthusiasm.

Americans will inquire: What manner of man is this who has become the conservator of a mighty empire? Intellectually, that is to say in sheer mental power and maturity, Senator Root alone among our statesmen could fairly be considered the compeer of Mr. Asquith, but in conception of the

functions and duties of leadership Mr. Roosevelt bears the more striking resemblance. Just as in 1901 one could prophesy with the utmost assurance that, whatever else Mr. Roosevelt might prove to be in the White House, he would never be a President of the McKinley type, so it was impossible to doubt that Mr. Asquith's accession meant not only a new man, but a new appreciation of his office and a new way of utilizing its powers. The transition from the one Premier to the other, while not the same in degree, was essentially the same in kind as the transition from the one President to the other. Not that Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Asquith have much in common. Far from it. One could more easily discover in them points of contrast than of comparison. The Prime Minister has none of the ex-President's fidgety activity, or of his sanguine, explosive impetuosity, or of his engaging many-sidedness, or of his passion for propounding estimable verities that hitherto had always been taken for granted, or of his headlong, hectoring temperament, or of his genius for advertisement. But he makes up for these distressing defects by being at least Mr. Roosevelt's equal in illimitable self-confidence and his superior in unvarying determination.

Mr. McKinley looked upon his office as a sort of conduit-pipe between Congress and the electorate; and though great things happened during his Presidency he can hardly be said to have directed them. He had no policies or convictions that he was not ready to abandon at the bidding of the populace—not because he was a timid man, but because the old tag *Vox populi, vox Dei* was something more than an old tag to him and summed up and satisfied his whole attitude toward democracy. Campbell-Bannerman did not minimize the privileges and opportunities of the Premiership so completely as all that. He made full and dexterous use of its negative prerogatives as a sort of court of appeal to which all men and all groups in the party might refer their disputes. But he was less a captain than an arbitrator; he allowed his Cabinet Ministers the widest possible latitude in the management of their own departments, and he regarded himself and his office as a center rather of accommodation than of leading. To men of Mr. Roosevelt's and Mr. Asquith's disposition such a view of their duties seems almost equivalent to abdication. Their instinct is to lead, not by following, by pushing from behind, but by going on in

front; and the characteristic of their type is to govern rather by insistence than by persuasion and to prefer the most direct route as being probably the easiest.

In other respects the two have little in common. Mr. Asquith has none of Mr. Roosevelt's engaging frankness, but there never arises in one's mind the faintest doubt of his complete genuineness or his perfect freedom from any form of vanity. His reputed alienation from human sympathies, too, is wholly mythical. He would never think of kissing strange babies to curry favor with the electorate, but no man is more devoted to the children he knows or better loved by them in return. Lord Rosebery surprised England when he declared that Mr. Asquith possessed qualities of heart surpassing even his qualities of head, but to his intimates the assertion bore no trace of novelty. His emotions are less vivid and, of course, much less in evidence than Mr. Roosevelt's, but they live, nevertheless, as the most powerful, even dominating, attributes of a strong man's nature. The impression to the contrary, as with Senator Root, is due to well-nigh perfect control which finds its genesis partly in recognition of the dignity of his position, but chiefly in a wholly unaffected simplicity amounting almost to shyness. To one who recalls the custom enforced by Mr. Roosevelt of dinner guests rising from the table and standing humbly and dumbly till the President had taken his place, the contrast in the great room built for William Pitt in Downing Street, where not even a lull in conversation attends the entrance of the Prime Minister, is as pleasing as it is marked.

If Mr. Asquith loses something by his habitual self-repression, he also gains a great deal, notably in those rare moments when, as in paying tribute to the late King or more recently to the universally beloved Lyttleton, some deeper surge of feeling sweeps over his reserve and surprises and moves the House by its eloquent revelation.

But those occasions are few. Ordinarily, almost invariably, Mr. Asquith's speeches in the House, like those of Mr. Root in the Senate, are as good as any public speaking can be that is not oratory. They are models of clearness and precision; full of vigorous thought, of trenchant and sonorous diction, and admirably arranged; stroke follows upon stroke without hesitation and with direct and compelling force; and yet they are as unmistakably not oratory as

George Eliot's verse is not poetry. The reason is that Mr. Asquith has himself almost too completely in hand, knows to a nicety just what he is going to say and how he is going to say it, and is never for a moment in any danger of being carried out of himself. The color and rhythm, the exaltation and abandon, of true oratory are not for him.

There is something, indeed, almost impersonal about Mr. Asquith's air on a public platform or when he rises to address the House. He seems independent of all emotional communion with his audience. It is symptomatic that he has never been known to make a bad speech or to be at a loss for an effective retort or unable to bring all his guns into action at a moment's notice. In every department of Parliamentary speaking—whether he is answering a supplementary question or unfolding a bill or winding up a debate—there is nobody in the House of Commons who approaches his level of sustained excellence. However damaging the attack upon the Government, there is a cheer of perfect confidence from the Liberal ranks when Asquith gets up to answer it. The stocky figure of medium height, the strong, clean-shaven, fresh-complexioned face that belies the white hair above it, give out an instant impression of assurance. With few gestures, squarely confronting the Opposition, the Prime Minister begins to speak. There is no appeal to passion in what he says, no loose generalities, no attempt at rhetoric, nothing over-subtle or bewildering. The sentences roll out with a hammer-like precision: the points made are direct and unambiguous; the argument never wanders; the humor is plain and intelligible; the language is massive without being ornate and virile without being violent; one gets the effect of some perfect machine producing an almost effortless fusillade of logical, ordered, deadly dialectics.

Like all public men who disdain to seek personal popularity by cultivating artifices, Mr. Asquith makes the mistake of doing things, or appearing to do them, too easily; one gets almost a sense of monotony from a survey of his unvarying triumphs. As a boy he captured all the school prizes; as a youth he won the blue riband of classical scholarship, the Balliol, became president of the Oxford Union, the famous debating society of the University, took the highest of degrees, carried off the Craven scholarship, and so impressed his professors and fellow-undergraduates, from Dr. Jowett

downward, that perhaps no man ever left Oxford amid so many or such confident predictions of a brilliant future. A few years later, after a wholesome period of struggle and difficulty, he was recognized as one of the most effective of English advocates; in Parliament he attracted Gladstone's favoring notice with almost his first speech; step by step he has mounted up till he is now the most powerful man in the British Empire.

And it has all been done without theatricality or self-advertisement, with no attempt to dazzle his contemporaries or force their applause, and without the least assistance from those advantages of birth, wealth, and social connections that in England more, perhaps, than in any other country smooth the path of political and legal ambition. A Yorkshireman of Puritan stock, born in moderate circumstances, Asquith has made his own way in life. His career is as fully a structure of his own rearing as Lloyd-George's or John Burns's; he might stand, indeed, alongside of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the President of the Local Government Board as a product and representative of that newer England in which men are judged and rewarded for what they are and do and not for the non-essentials of lineage or means or social position. He does not belong to, and has little sympathy or affiliation with, "the governing class"; and the distinction has enabled him to keep in touch and understanding with the newer movements long past the age when most Liberals are Whigs and most Whigs Conservatives.

As a statesman, Mr. Asquith undoubtedly will live in history as the conductor of a profound Constitutional revolution to a successful issue, and probably, as we have already suggested, as the true conservator of an empire's very existence in its time of gravest peril. As a man, we should say that to the minds of the many he, like Sir Robert Peel, appears and is likely to continue to appear as one who would have been the greatest of all British Premiers if his personality had equaled his performances, while to the few brought into closest contact he bears out to perfection the impression of Charles Fox expressed by Gibbon when he "admired the powers of a superior man blended with the softness and simplicity of a child—a human being perfectly exempt from the taint of malevolence, vanity, or falsehood."

THE EDITOR.

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